

## THE DEADLY HOUSE: DOMESTIC SPACE AND SOCIO-CULTURAL ROLES IN SUNETRA GUPTA'S *A SIN OF COLOUR*

### *LA MANSIÓN MORTÍFERA: EL ESPACIO DOMÉSTICO Y LOS ROLES SOCIOCULTURALES EN A SIN OF COLOUR DE SUNETRA GUPTA*

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#### Abstract

The working hypothesis from which this article stems consists in approaching the literary text as a discursive space where cultural structures are re-/de-/constructed and cultural changes are observed, predicted, and even wrought. Studying literature not only as a reproductive process of cultural mimesis, but as an actual process of culture *production*, I analyse Sunetra Gupta's fourth novel *A Sin of Colour* in an effort to prove that literary texts constitute an invaluable field of study for cultural anthropology that is not exclusively inscribed in parochial and time-bound ethnic identities. On the contrary, it offers an insight into universal mechanisms of cultural configuration. In particular, I will argue that Gupta uses the conventions and symbolisms of the Gothic genre to represent her characters' perception of domestic space in order to signify their experience of the patriarchal family structure as that of an alienating dimension of imposition, oppression and repression.

**Key words:** Anthropoliterature. Literary analysis. Collective identities. Identity-construction processes. Gothic symbolism. Diaspora. Postcolonial subjects. Migrant subjects. Social roles. Domestic space. Family structures. Patriarchal family institution. Sunetra Gupta

#### Resumen

La hipótesis de trabajo de la que parte este trabajo consiste en una lectura del texto literario como espacio discursivo en el que las estructuras culturales son re-/des-/construidas y dentro del cual se pueden observar, predecir e incluso forjar cambios culturales. Acercándome, pues, a la literatura no sólo como proceso reproductivo de mimesis cultural, sino como auténtico proceso de *producción* cultural, analizo la cuarta novela de Sunetra Gupta, *A Sin of Clour*, en un esfuerzo por demostrar que los textos literarios constituyen un valioso campo de estudio para la antropología cultural que no se encuentra exclusivamente adscrito a identidades atadas a un período y a un lugar concretos. Al contrario, el análisis del texto literario se adentra en los mecanismos universales de configuración cultural. En concreto, me propongo probar el hecho de que Gupta, al representar la percepción del espacio doméstico por parte de sus personajes, hace uso de las convenciones y simbolismos del género gótico con el fin de poner de manifiesto su experiencia de la estructura familiar patriarcal como la de una enajenante dimensión de imposición, opresión y represión.

**Palabras clave:** Antropoliteratura. Análisis literario. Identidades colectivas. Procesos de construcción de la identidad. Simbología gótica. Diáspora. Sujetos poscoloniales. Sujetos migrantes. Roles sociales. Espacio doméstico. Estructuras familiares. Institución de la familia patriarcal. Sunetra Gupta.

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## A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL RELEVANCE

Before delving into the manifold dimensions of Sunetra Gupta's fourth novel, it is necessary to clarify two main points: from what methodological and theoretical premises I propose to conduct the analysis of the said text, and to what end.

In his introduction to the volume *Literary Anthropology* (Poyatos, 1988: xi-xxiii), Fernando Poyatos provides a neat outline of what methodological strategies and epistemological intentions are to be applied to literature so as to extract anthropological meaning from it. His work insists on the relevance of the study of kinesics, body language and other non-verbal communicative instances as clear indicators of the existence and direction of a certain cultural discourse inscribed in a given synchronic ethnicity. However, Poyatos' stance on the use of anthropoliterature as a fundamental tool in the interpretation of literary texts as anthropological spaces constitutes one of the starting points of a discipline which, a few decades later, is still frowned upon in many academic circles. Indeed, the very act of drawing well defined boundaries between anthropoliterature and literary criticism, cultural studies and cultural anthropology can prove difficult enough, let alone an attempt to determine up to what extent a sub-branch of anthropology such as anthropoliterature may be useful to the accomplishment of the various objectives set by the larger epistemological frame of the former. This is not to say, nevertheless, that the only value of anthropoliterature is that of assisting, so to speak, its older sister in her endeavours. The application of different methods of analysis to the same field of study may doubtlessly result in unexpected conclusions. Likewise, the use of the same methodology together with different working hypothesis or to support different deductions may easily have radically different outcomes as far as the global interpretation of the gathered data is concerned. In other words, a new and heuristic conceptualisation of anthropoliterature could give birth to a discipline which uses *both* the methodologies traditionally deployed by literary analysis and criticism, *and* those cultivated by cultural anthropology; a discipline, that is, flexible enough to adapt its working methods to such a shifting and plural reality as human culture; a discipline, in fact, whose ultimate purpose is not simply that of describing the elements of which a given cultural system consists of and their relative function, but that of investigating the very mechanisms through which culture is produced, that is to say, the ongoing construction of cultural memes and cultural structures *as it happens*.

Poyatos' seemingly limited use of the virtually infinite range of possibilities offered by the anthropological study of literary *tropoi* might be pointed at as the reason behind such aversion towards the anthropoliterary hybrid on behalf of more conservative researchers. Like others, he seems to be mainly interested in the literary work as a mimetic representation of actual socio-cultural systems. From this point of view, the literary text is nothing but a Polaroid version of full-size, real life anthropological phenomena. It is thus understandable that primary sources, that is, real, unfiltered samples of a given socio-cultural system are largely to be preferred to more indirect reflections of the same system. This is so, at least, if the underlying purpose is that of *describing* a certain socio-cultural system. Anthropoliterature, if defined as the painstaking analysis of socio-cultural markers and the symbolic structures which give them substance in literary texts, can be of obvious use in the study of past civilisations with significant literary heritage, but of only relative importance in the study of contemporary cultures. After all, the same methodology with the very same goals could be applied to any other type of text, from newspaper articles to TV advertisements, from companies' internal policy documents to Internet websites. What I argue is that, independently of the methodology of choice –be it of an indisputably anthropological nature, or more of a stylistic or semantic persuasion–, at the heart of any anthropoliterary research study should be an objective intrinsic to the particular reality of the literary universe and only attainable if pursued within its limits. If we consider literature not only as a cultural production, but as culture production, as a form of producing culture in anthropological terms, then it follows that the fundamental purpose in examining literary texts from an anthropological perspective will be that of observing how culture is generated in the dialogue established between creative writing and the act of reading.

Being aware of the extraordinary complexity of a concept like culture, I do not intend to imply that the study of literary texts would exhaust all need for further research into other mechanisms of culture production, nor do I mean that the way in which phenomena and ideologies, beliefs and facts are presented in the language of literature necessarily mirrors each and every subtle process by which culture is constructed and remodelled over and over. Such a collective construct as culture is easily identifiable with a living organism constantly pulsating to the rhythm of the environmental context it stands in and, at the same time, subject to continuous change as it grows and thrives, or languishes and decays. Moreover, it consists itself of a myriad of other smaller entities which, like cells, are

systems in themselves. To identify literature with the whole organism of culture would be as restrictive as considering literature as a mere mirror of reality. Indeed, literature, just as it re-presents culture or, in other words, shows us again what we already see around us, also presents new content, generating cultural productions which do not simply absorb and bounce whatever is taking place in a given cultural system, but also filter and add to everything that is fed to it by that very cultural system. In short, while literature undeniably re-produces the culture where it is being generated, it also *produces* culture on its own while doing so. Literature is not just a diachronic and synchronic product of a given culture, on the contrary, it is a space in which historically specific cultures become the object of scrutiny and reflection, thus provoking evolutionary or involutory movements in culture, or are subject to criticism and even subversion, thus initiating revolutionary tremors in the cultural fabric. Furthermore, and contrary to other types of texts, literary ones embrace and deal with every single aspect of human life, so that by analysing literature one can de facto study the process through which every aspect of a cultural system is entwined around its fundamental pillars. Literature as either propaganda of a given ideological hegemony or as apology of counter-hegemonic resistance is effectually functioning as a space in which culture in its widest sense is moulded and cast. Furthermore, literature, as the universal process of culture production it is, transcends the boundaries of time and space so that the results of its analysis can be applied far beyond the limitedness of an ethnographic study.

I am, however, much aware of the subjectivity which imbues contemporary literary texts and which could, *a priori*, be considered as opposite to the collective essence of cultures as represented in ancient epic texts. The very omniscience of a third person narrator, either constantly shifting its identification with this or that character's point of view, or appointing a character as the one and only focaliser of narrative action, is as indicative of the primary subjective nature of XX century literature as a first person narrator. On the other hand, and taking into account the fact that cultures *do* originate through the combined effort of colliding individualities, subjects re-/op-pressed or re-/op-pressing others and a mapping of the social system in which all positions are relative to the location of individual subjects, each and every datum gathered by anthropologists –starting with informers' accounts- can be easily seen as a *subjective* perception of collective realities. And so can literary works. It is impossible to ask the members of a given cultural system to produce *objective* descriptions of it, as each will be unavoidably tinted with the specific

colours that are filtered through the prism of their personal perspective and relative to their individual place in society. It is likewise impossible to separate surgically the authors' personal perceptions from their work. In both cases, it is the researcher's job to work out the various socio-cultural strategies that transform the sum of individual subjectivities into a whole new collective identity. Through the analysis of Sunetra Gupta's *A Sin of Colour* ([1999] 2000) I intend to demonstrate how a literary analysis can not only address anthropological issues such as the construction of socially (dis)functional roles within patriarchal family space and the rituals associated with its re-construction generation after generation, but also hint at the impact which the said roles and rituals have on the development of individuals and, in turn, the influence which the process of self-construction on behalf of those individuals has on the specific configuration of collective identity, collective space, and collective institutions.

Methodologically speaking, I have concentrated my analysis on the symbolic apparatus which, being evidently moulded on the main pillars of the Gothic genre, confers a distinctive meaning to the representation of domestic space. By analysing the way in which the physical dimension of the family is portrayed, I have attempted to depict the asset and layout of such metaphysical spaces as those of (un)belongingness to a group, self-identification and (re-)construction of interpersonal bonds. In doing so, I have purposefully eschewed a purely semantic approach, and have instead integrated the study of genre-specific stylistic forms that clearly contribute to the weaving of meaning throughout the text, with the description and contextual interpretation of symbolic markers that allow the author to build multilayered and interdependent metaphysical, metalinguistic, social and psychological dimensions on the material delimitations of domestic space. My point here is that we should not -and indeed cannot- describe anthropoliterature in such restrictive terms that it practically becomes tantamount to an application of anthropolinguistics or, more often, ethnolinguistics, to the literary text. We should exceed, as well, the limited approach of certain aesthetical literary criticism more preoccupied with disentangling the subtleties of style and form than with dealing with the complexities of meaning and content. The analysis of the literary text, as I understand it and as I will try to show in the following pages, is particularly relevant from an anthropological perspective when used in order to expose, contextualise, interpret and compare the symbolic structures on which a literary text has been built and according to which it will be read. In this sense, Gupta's novel constitutes *per se* a space where, by means

of artistic conventions –art, up to some extent, can be said to be a ritual in itself-, the physical, the metaphysical, the socio-cultural, and the psychological coexist all together like intersecting dimensions meeting within the boundaries of linguistic space.

### **THE POSTCOLONIAL GOTHIC MANSION: THE HAUNTED/HAUNTING HOUSE IN CALCUTTA**

As I have already mentioned, it is the aim of this paper to carry out on Gupta's fourth novel -although any of her novels would have served the purpose- an analysis which reads the symbolic systems used to depict domestic space as a clear instance of the Gothicisation of Postcolonial space. The gloomy, looming, ominous family mansion standing tall and impregnable like a medieval fortress at the core of Gupta's novels constitutes the epicentre of an ever growing, all-engulfing space of Gothic anxiety in which characters find themselves trapped in-between fear and desire, belongingness and unbelongingness, imprisonment and exile, personal yearnings and family impositions. Thus, the usefulness of Gothic symbolism and conventions in the context of Gupta's narrative in general and of this novel in particular does not only lie in its power to evoke a particular aesthetical landscape –that of the sublime decay and secret horror of the decadent aristocratic castle-, but mainly in its being intimately linked with the ambiguous condition of the threatening marginalised Other facing the threatened central Self. Sunetra Gupta, a migrant born in India, raised in Africa and educated in North America and Britain, senses the closeness of the Gothic dichotomy of the One opposing and/or resisting the Other to the fragmentation of the Postcolonial subject. The Postcolonial migrant is perceived, at once, as an Other to the Western world, being still feared as much as it is desired in its glossy exoticism, and a Self confronting its Otherness and resisting it while equally pining for and rejecting the comforting simplicity of a unified, monolithic identity.

As much as it is possible to find numerous examples of the penetration of the Gothic into the fabric of colonial fiction set in the margins of the Empire, it is likewise possible to find plenty of instances –though they have been object of in-depth studies only recently- of Gothicised tales of the penetration of the colonial Other into the Centre of the Empire, as Tamish Khair convincingly argues (Khair, 2009). However, it is the latter pattern that is particular relevant to my analysis, as it anticipates the diasporic ordeal experienced in Postcolonial times. At any rate, either movement, that of the Centre towards the Margin,

or that of the Margin into the Centre, implies a clash between the Other and the Self, which is, indeed, at the very core of what Punter (1980) and Hogle (2002) define as the “Gothic anxiety”. The fact that a diasporic author such as Sunetra Gupta seems to make use of both movements in her novels is easily explicable as a literary representation of the social and psychological journey experienced by migrant subjects. If the transgression of socio-cultural boundaries in classic Gothic fiction signals the entrance into the realm of the Other, and such a breach into what is opposite to or devoid of the Self allows, in turn, horror and terror to seep through into the dominions of the One, likewise, travelling over and beyond political frontiers implies the transformation of the migrant self into an Other, and their subsequent journey into the heart of the former colonial metropolis into one tinged with the ominous hues of monstrosity, as the migrant subject sees their self either perceived as a deviant version of the Western Self, or else nullified as an abysmal absence of such Self (Khair, 2009: 8-18).

Each of Gupta’s novels offers a symmetric representation of the intrusion of the Other into the centre of a system recognised as the Self. True to her personal experience of diaspora, Gupta imagines her characters as perpetually coming and going from their native homeland to a foreign exile. From India to Britain, from Britain to India: depending on which character is functioning as the focaliser of the action, the relative concepts of “home” and “abroad” will change their referential reality. Such oscillation does not take only place across physical geography, but mostly in the metaphysical and metaphorical dimensions of memory, imagination and dream. It is in these three dimensions that the psychological re-/de-/construction of the main characters’ identity takes place, and it is in the discursive development of the characters’ stream of consciousness that the material configuration of the family house is rewritten to match both its perception on behalf of the focaliser and the effect that the social structure that inhabits it has on its subaltern members. If the focalisers’ experience of family life and family structure is that of a voracious predator ready to swallow them and assimilate them into its system, the figurative use of Gothic codes to represent domestic space as an Indian Castle of Otranto (Walpole, [1794] 1993) dovetails beautifully into the characters’ urge to pour out their often repressed apprehensions and anxieties. If, then, the unbearable continuity of the clash between two antagonist forces –on the one hand, the need to save one’s self and flee from the monstrous family space; on the other, the desire to yield to the enticing security and homogeneity of collectiveness and to belong finally in/to a family- bursts into

frustration and rage, the victims of the tyrannical family institution may very well turn themselves into Gothified and magnified fiends. As we shall see, the outcast, rejected by their family because unfit or unwilling to submit themselves to the rigid rules of such hierarchical dimension, returns like a Nosferatu to conquer and haunt that very domestic space which had previously broken and haunted them. Otherwise, the irredeemable fragmentation of the subaltern subject's identity, torn between the need to satisfy the demands of collectiveness and the desire to fulfil their own aspirations, might impel them to alienate their self, that is, to turn into an alien version of their self, a monstrous alter ego as destructive towards itself as it is towards the elements and networks conforming collective space.

Just as Gothic fiction can be used, and indeed, has been used to represent both collective and individual anxieties (Botting, 1996; Baldick, 1992), thus portraying both mass cultural (r)evolutions and their effect on the individual subjective sphere, Postcolonial literature reflects the effect of the global on the individual and, at the same time, projects individual microcosms onto the supra-individual structure of collectiveness. It does so primarily through the prism of personal and interpersonal experiences. Subjective perceptions of the collective let external social realities ooze into the self, altering its original identity. Likewise, personal outward projections transfigure the configuration of socio-cultural structures according to the individual's point of view and their specific location on the social map.

The friction between what the individual desires and what social rules and conventions impose is at the root of the dualistic polarisation of Postcolonial, as well as Gothic characters. The resulting anxiety, which gives way to a Gothicisation of real and imagined spaces, erases all spatial markers, milestones, boundaries, tracks and paths from geographical and mental territories, except for the line that divides what is One from what is Other. In Gupta's novels, this reduces space to a continuum symmetrically divided into extensions or reflections of the deadly family space at the origin of the characters' identity crisis. Everywhere is either on one side or the other of domestic walls, either identical to the Calcutta family home or else opposite to it. A Kafkian obsessive repetition or an equally alienating absence. The in-betweenness to which diasporic subjects seem to be condemned is here not a "third space" (Bhabha, 1990) positively experienced and even susceptible of becoming "home" to the migrant Self, but a nightmarish impossibility of



escaping the ruthless rigidity of the fixed socio-cultural norms that shape the space of origin, except to fall into no man's land and find the self as deprived of the ability to construct its identity as it was when it saw it crushed under the imposition of a collective one. For the will to exceed the material delimitations of the original home, the haunted and haunting old mansion in Calcutta, and consequently, to transgress its social-cultural rules and expectations, does not imply a desire to exile the self from the idea of home. On the contrary, Gupta's characters are all desperate to find a new place of belongingness in which to begin the process of self-identity construction far from the oppressive normativity and rigid hierarchy of collective domesticity. A place that is "home" without being confined to the walls of a house. In this sense, mapping space equals mapping the self (Brah, 1996): the journey into identity crosses geographical space for the migrant subject but it also traverses the metaphysical spaces of memory and imagination, as well as of socially configured networks in which the character's identity is dependant on its relative position in space and in social micro and macrocosms (Nasta, 2002). Of all these "imagined homelands", to quote Rushdie (1992), I am going to concentrate on the metaphorical spaces which a few of the main characters in *A Sin of Colour* (henceforth, *A Sin*) create on top of the sensorial delimitations of the family house in Calcutta in order to escape, in some cases, or to conquer the social space identified with it.

In Gupta's fourth novel, as in all the previous ones, domestic space is anchored in a decayed, agonising family house that is now but a faint shadow of what it used to be, and is, at the same time, symmetrically reflected and projected over long geographical, cultural and psychological distances on a comfortable, even magnificent house in London. The former used to be perceived as a deadly trap oppressing and repressing the main characters' personal growth, but is now an agonising empty shell to which the said characters –Niharika and Debendranath– feel irresistibly drawn to. If the past belongs to the Calcutta house, the remembered and thus imagined space of origins, the present, also transfigured in the metaphysical experience of dream, hope and fantasy, is physically located in the London house. However, and this is what makes Gupta's novel so interesting from an anthropoliterary point of view, both domestic spaces merge into one spatial continuum in which present, past and future are relative to each character's perception of collective space and of their location in it. In the following sections, I will compare a few characters' subjective vision of domestic space with the way their personal identities are de-/constructed by the collective institution of a patriarchal family. For

practical reasons, I will only focus on the Calcutta house and will consequently limit my analysis to those characters who are clearly objectified and victimised by the social structure identified with that material house. In fact, another element which contributes to the textual continuity between Gupta's novels is the portrait of three generations in a family -sharing either blood or emotional ties- always articulated on both sides of the diasporic chasm. Characters from the first generation, like Indranath, the patriarch and founder of the Calcutta house in *A Sin*, and his wife Neerupama, spend the entirety of their life in the original family space. The second generation usually goes to and fro, constantly transgressing the space of origins, trying to reconstruct it overseas and dramatically regressing to it. In *A Sin*, this generation is represented by characters like Debendranath, Indranath's younger son, who falls hopelessly in love with his brother's wife Reba, and seeks refuge from his consuming passion in England first, and then, after having faked his death, on a hill station in Northern India, only to return, blind and exhausted, to the Calcutta house to spend there his last days. Niharika, Reba's daughter, represents the third generation in *A Sin*, but will not be studied in detail here since third generation characters are the ones who successfully exceed the oppressiveness of the Calcutta house and manage to construct their self-identity within a new and nurturing home in England.

## DEATH BY NULLIFICATION

### Imposed roles

When Neerupama enters the domestic space of Mandalay, she is forced to behave as expected of a young bride of her status. This behaviour requires her to give precedence to wifely duties –as defined by Bengali tradition-, so she has to postpone and eventually ban her dream of gaining access to university in the face of the ever growing number of unavoidable and pressing demands on behalf of her family. Since all these duties are confined to the household circle, the Calcutta house is literally shutting her in. Moreover, a subtle tragic irony permeates her situation because, in truth, she is never requested or ordered to abandon her studies. Like Cinderella, she is simply asked to deal with an endless series of chores and domestic tasks, before she attends the ball. What gives the symbolic dimension of the Calcutta house the veritable features of a monstrous entity is the fact that the character seems to be given a choice when in fact she is not. Her mother-in-law does not stare in horror at the suggestion of her resuming her studies, she does not tell her to

forget about her Matriculation exams, she simply says that she can not go *that* day, because “an important elderly relation was coming to spend the day [...] all the way from Chinsurah to see her and it would not do for her to be absent for the whole day” (*A Sin*, 44). Even her husband is sympathetic enough to console her “with the thought that she might be able to take them the following year”, and goes so far as to promise to “engage tutors for [her], so that [she would] be better prepared” (44-45). It is actually Neerupama who first throws in the towel, an apparent free choice, her “surrender[ing] to the circumstances of her new life” (143) a seeming consequence of Neerupama’s own doing. Who knows what would have happened if she had not ceased in her fight?

“But [she] knew all the time that it would not have made a difference, for even if she had managed to sneak away on that day, the day after she would surely have been somehow detained, and if not the day after then the day after the day after, she locked herself in the bathroom and sobbed bitterly for as long as she was to stay unnoticed there” (44).

Within the already secluded and secluding space of the Calcutta mansion, Neerupama can only find, I will not say freedom, but at least intimacy in an even smaller, more restricted space, that of the bathroom, quite possibly the only room in the house she could lock herself in. The Calcutta house slowly but firmly shoves the individual’s subjectivity, their hopes and dreams, the inner urge that sows the seed of one’s own individual identity, into more and more limited enclosures, smaller and smaller spaces until whatever dimensions of the individual do not match the identity imposed by the collective finally become but skeletons in a closet.

There is not a space so entrapping as that in which intimacy requires a locked door, a space where the self is under such constant scrutiny by the inquiring and judging gaze of a public –and the patriarchal family here *is* represented as a *public* space- that no emotions may be unleashed that are not approved by the hegemonic power structure. And in that space she is to spend all her life, quietly resisting the oppression of a life designed and imposed by others, by blindly obeying the rules of the game. Neerupama puts her foot down. She refuses to embody what ideal of womanhood the power system may have. Her rebellion takes the form of passive reluctance, though. A passivity which, indeed, disempowers the institutionalised role of the married woman imposed on her, while it also undermines her chances of self-empowerment. She has to be a mother and a mother she is, although one whose “concern for [her children] would never stray beyond the rational, [...] [i]t was as if she had decided to accept motherhood without any of its agony, and had somehow

succeeded” (11). She has to be a rich matron, queen of her house, but “she, so refined in spirit, had hardly any taste at all when it came to material things, [...] she had gone through life without the burden of decorating her new home, or even selecting her own wardrobe” (7). Until this game of passively subverting the meaning of her role without actually denying it finally broke her worn-out strength.

### An alienating space

And here she was, without warning, seeking to master those precious talents by which Reba had put her stamp upon the set of rooms that had been allotted to her and her husband. [...] And then came the day when [Debendranath] returned in the evening to find her busily instructing the carpenter to put shelves outside her drawing room where the long corridor turned and came to an end, so that she might have a small kitchen of her own, I need jars, some pans, she said, looking up at him from the floor where she sat fiddling with a small kerosene stove, and it was then that he had realised that his mother had gone mad (7-8).

Like another “mad woman in the attic”, Neerupama is jerked awake from her defensive insensitivity by another woman, a Jane Eyre (Brontë [1847] 1993) who succeeds where she has failed. The torpor which has sheltered her from the painful reality of her imprisonment is shattered to pieces when Reba gracefully and effortlessly demonstrates what a true housewife should be. Neerupama then seems to realise that, just as she has failed to be what she wanted to be, she has also failed to be what the household expected her to be. And physical death soon follows her mental and emotional breakdown.

Neerupama’s estrangement from reality is set off by Reba’s arrival, but it is expressed through her relationship with the Calcutta house. Likewise, in Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (Du Maurier, [1938] 2003), the Gothicisation of the protagonist’s experience of Manderley is caused by the overbearing though ghostly presence of the late mistress of the house. In both novels, the destructive effects of the presence of an/Other woman are conveyed through the main character’s uncanny perception of the house’s fixtures and ambience. In *A Sin*, however, the relationship between the original and the newly-arrived mistress of the house is inverted for it is young Reba who “has finally taken over all of Mandalay” (144). Whereas, in *Rebecca*, the first Mrs de Winter eventually reclaims the whole ancient mansion through the agency of her sinister alter-ego, Mrs Danvers, snatching it from the hands of her murderous widower and her successor, the second and nameless Mrs de Winter, who acknowledges that “Manderley was [hers] no longer” (Du Maurier, [1938] 2003: 4)<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.

The Calcutta mansion in *A Sin* behaves similarly to its British equivalent in du Maurier's novel in that they both act as extensions of the character's self, not just as representations of the battle field on which rivalries can be settled in terms of ownership and domination of a material enclosure. Neerupama, like the second Mrs De Winter, is driven into a space in which her identity is subject and must thence conform to her new role as part of the household dimension. The name of the youthful heroine in *Rebecca* is lost to the reader, who only knows her by her husband's surname, or by the terms "dear" (*Rebecca*: 19), "child" (107), or "Madam" (73) with which she is variously addressed by the other characters<sup>2</sup>. Her identity is thus only acknowledged in relation to her marriage, either as the flawed substitute of her predecessor or as the ingenuous child-wife of the landlord. Likewise, Neerupama's identity is solely envisioned by the members of the Calcutta house through her performance as wife, mother, and lady. When her husband, Indranath Roy, remembers his late wife, he recalls her cold, detached approach to motherhood (*A Sin*, 11), and the exhausted, "deep consummated peace" (45) in which her last pregnancy had left her, the "angelic" purity that had made him feel "it would be obscene to lay his hands upon her" (11), or her discomfort at having been suddenly thrust into the position of a wealthy lady who should amend for her privileges through charity (10, 13).

Would you like that? he persisted, to have a school named after you – The Srimati Neerupama Roy Girls' Primary School – would that please you? he asked.

The sudden shock of her *new name* caused her to tremble under her heavy garments [my emphasis] (10).

The power of the "nomen-omen" binomial provides Neerupama with a new identity –a "new name"–, one which she has neither sought nor accepted. That it was not her choice is evident in that, before meeting her husband-to-be, "she had felt she must devote herself to delivering people from the yoke of poverty, from colonial oppression, the injustices of feudalism" (12), and "instead she had become the wife of a timber merchant, mother of five well-fed children, and so little besides" (13). That she did not accept her situation as a married woman is obvious since she does not respond to the imposed role by fulfilling the

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<sup>2</sup> Intertextuality is widely used by Gupta in all her novels not only to weave a dialectic fabric that connects her discourse with both Western and Eastern traditions, but also to represent the way in which literary, linguistic, and philosophical texts can be and indeed, are used to construct the individual's space of self-identification. For instance, just like Gupta's first novel *Memories of Rain* can be easily read as a Postcolonial, Postmodernist version of the Greek myth of Medea and, in particular, as a response to Kennelly's version of Euripides' tragedy, *A Sin of Colour*, as shall be argued throughout this paper, mirrors several key aspects, both in its plot and in its symbolic structures, of another, although much more recent, Western classic, Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*.

expectations of those who only see her as mother, wife, or lady, as Reba would do years later. On the contrary, Neerupama lapses into “the great stillness that Debendranath Roy knew, like the silence within a dark and broken temple, soft with stale sandalwood” (45). The patriarchal asset of domestic space eventually drains those who do not conform to it of their own individual subjectivity, but, instead of refilling them with a new, collectively chosen identity -as it happens with those who readily embrace the imposition- it leaves them empty like useless carcasses, like abandoned shells, like deserted buildings.

### **Stolen identities**

Silence and stillness are thus the consequences of an imposed role which does not refill the gap left by a personal identity torn off and stolen, and which silences both word and action. And this is how her son, Debendranath Roy, finds her: a resigned, nullified woman, the empty shell of her former self carefully attending her duties with the indifferent precision of a robot. Even though her husband and youngest son perceive the soulless “imperturbable calmness” (12) to be a symptom of the disappearance of “all traces of yearning” (45), they are unable to restore any glow of life into her apathy. Indranath Roy “suspected that he had stifled something within her”, and attempts to revive her by “taking her on a trip to Europe” (12). But the brief enthusiasm with which Neerupama embraces the idea of “travelling to the lands that she has dreamt of so often as child, [...] locking her into histories that were not hers”, soon evaporates and, “by the time they arrived to London, she was already weary and longing to be back within the cool walls of their home in Calcutta” (12). After years spent living a life which is not hers, the prospect of finding herself resurrecting the buried dreams of her childhood, and of walking among spaces which are not hers anymore than the Calcutta house is, makes her yearn for the padded numbness of her husband’s mansion.

The Calcutta house has firstly turned her into a tamed, selfless zombie, and has then extended its influence to the point of reaching Neerupama even far away from the physical terrain of the mansion, causing her to suffer from something, *mutatis mutandis*, similar to the iatrogenic syndrome in asylum inmates. At least, her domestic prison has turned into a refuge from external longings, a place so far away from the outer world that oblivion comes easy and, with it, some kind of peace.

### Imposed identities

However, her peaceful limbo is suddenly broken by Reba's arrival, and the subsequent intrusion of the external into the internal cosmos of the Calcutta house. The fortress house revives under Reba's competence in housewifery, just like the mansion in *Rebecca* had known its splendour under the meticulous supervision of the first Mrs de Winter (*Rebecca*, 307). Reba "hummed with a temperate woman's energy, transforming her corner of the great house into a region of easy beauty, with flowerpots on the balcony, and framed Moghul miniatures on the walls" (*A Sin*, 14). Rebecca's corner of the great house is "a woman's room, graceful, fragile, the room of someone who had chosen every particle of furniture with great care, so that each chair, each vase, each small, infinitesimal thing should be in harmony with one another, and with her own personality" (*Rebecca*, 93). Woman's energy and a woman's room: both quotations stress a "feminine virtue" which has played a role of such importance in the construction of both the ideal of domestic heaven and that of the Victorian "angel of the house" (Langland, 1995). Unlike Neerupama, both Reba and Rebecca possess the talent of turning "a house into a home". Furthermore, they have the ability of transforming domestic space, the "woman's place", into their own space, thus contrasting dramatically with Neerupama and the second Mrs de Winter, both trapped in alien space. In particular, Reba is interiorised as someone who apparently masters the roles of wife, mother, and angel of the house, someone who embodies the threefold triumph of womanhood as constructed in the collective imagination of a shared culture, and at the same time seems to be able to retain her "personality", her own identity, to the extent that she can imprint it on the surrounding environment.

Reba's presence gives Neerupama the impression that it is possible to embrace the role imposed by the power structures that support and organise domestic space, and turn it into an identity that, far from suppressing one's subjectivity, seems to highlight it. The collective ideal becomes assimilated, incarnated in the individual, and made into a part of Reba's identity. And this shocking revelation is what pushes Neerupama towards a sad mockery of her daughter-in-law.

Then, from Neerupama's perspective, the monstrosity of the Calcutta house resides in its being a space where personal identity is lost, and the individual self is silenced in exchange for belongingness to a communal dimension. Individual identity, as the dynamic process it

is and not a fixed, pre-determined category, is incompatible with the supra-individual structure of the Calcutta house for, at least, two reasons.

Firstly, within the familiar symbolic order, personal identity equals a functional role, as Elizabeth Bott's investigations prove ([1975] 1990: 238-239). Each member is primordially recognised, accordingly, as father, mother, son, daughter, uncle, aunt, grandmother, grandfather, and so on. We could even go so far as to say that they are not truly *known* as individuals. They are *re-cognised*, that is, they are first acknowledged because of the pre-ordained niche they occupy: that of father, mother, son, etc. This is obviously due to the fact that inclusion in the familiar space is granted *because* of the existence of some blood link, which becomes therefore a significant aspect of the individual's perception on behalf of the others. But, since genetic bonds among the family members do not receive homogeneous consideration, but are qualified in an order established according to categories such as age and gender, the significance of one's particular bond is substantially increased. Indeed, blood links would then not only mean legitimate belongingness, locating the subject inside family space, but would also specify their behaviour, the way in which they will behave towards and address every other member of the household, locating thus the subject on a particular step of a hierarchical space. Therefore, if what primes is not who a member of the family is, but what they are in relation to others, individual identity is not individual at all, but it is only acknowledged as a sub-part of a collective system. Moreover, individual identity is not identity either, but the sum of all the duties and rights that are synonymous with one's status on the family scale. In other words, just as it does not matter who the actor is as long as they play their part as expected, family members need not have a personal identity, as long as they fulfil their role. And this is exactly Neerupama's case, as it may be deduced by her mother-in-law's words: she did not mind Neerupama's keenness on getting a university degree; she was not upset by her attempting to enrich her identity by locating herself on a wider map than the family one. What is stressed by Gupta's phrasing is that all these considerations are simply irrelevant, and that what matters, from the point of view of family space, is that Neerupama plays her role as a new bride as expected by the visiting relatives.

Secondly, if family roles depend on blood links –or symbolic kinship, in the case of daughters and sons in law-, it follows that fixity will be one of their most obvious aspects. One's role will only experience those changes that will permit them to meet different



interlocutors with the degree of respect due to them, or to adjust their behaviour to the kind of duty they are to perform towards some particular member of the house. But one is a mother, a father, a daughter or a son for life. Individuals may go upwards on the family hierarchy as their age or marital status changes, but interpersonal relationships will still be subject to the frozen pattern of the family tree. The familiar space of the Calcutta house is then constructed on roles which, like the nodes in a network (Bott, [1971] 1990: 91-136), are connected to other people and are in turn regarded by them throughout fixed channels, fixed paths and modes of discourse that are, in fact, more concerned with relative locations than with individual identities. Indeed, whatever exceeds the boundaries of one's node, one's location point in family space, falls out into the empty space between the lines that constitute the family network, as in the case of Neerupama, whose academic pursuits fall out of the family map and are consequently irrelevant, ignored, nullified.

Of course, this particular representation of family space is not necessarily shared by all its members, and, what is more, will significantly mutate according to such categories as age, gender or the generation to which one belongs. Neerupama's experience as a victim of patriarchal family order is considerably different from that of Reba a generation later, just as much as hers differs from that of Niharika in the third generation. Being male, Debendranath possesses a larger range of action compared to his mother's, but his personal space is still constrained by the fixity and limitations of family space. His is the role of the abused younger son, a key figure in classic Gothic fiction, especially in the so-called "masculine Gothic" of Lewis, Godwin, and Maturin, but also, more often than not, depicted as the figure that will eventually develop into the prototypical villain (Ferguson Ellis, 1989: 40-44). Debendranath will certainly not evolve to be a monstrous tyrant, but he does share the fate of many a Gothic figure in that he will taste the bitterness of the "fall from grace" and the roaming homelessness of the "outsider". However, although he seems to bear an interesting resemblance to Caleb Williams (Godwin, [1794] 1978<sup>3</sup>) –as I shall argue later-, he seems to be also quite close to the ambiguity of the nameless narrator in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*. The second Mrs de Winter can be defined as an "outsider" paradoxically locked in domestic space, thus defying the "outsider-insider" opposition conventional in 1790's Gothic text.

## DEATH BY DISLOCATION

<sup>3</sup> Also compare with the figure of the outcast in *Melmoth the Wandered* (Maturin, [1820] 1998)

### Reclaiming the Garden of Eden

The echoes of *Rebecca* in Gupta's fourth novel are, indeed, too striking to be mere coincidence, and they mainly revolve around the significance and role of the house in both narratives. The name chosen by Gupta, although allegedly related to the Burmese city of Mandalay (*A Sin*, 10), sounds exactly –at least in British English– like the name Manderley, given by du Maurier to the splendid and mysterious house that stages most of *Rebecca's* plot. Moreover, the well-known first sentence in du Maurier's texts, “[l]ast night I dreamt I went to Manderley again” (*Rebecca*, 1), is reissued, almost literally, in the fifth chapter of *A Sin*: “[t]hat night he dreamt he was at the gates of Mandalay again” (127). Both the focaliser in du Maurier's novel and Debendranath in Gupta's are confronted with their wish to enter the gates and the physical impossibility of trespass. The one “stood by the iron gate leading to the drive, and for a while [she] could not enter, for the way was barred to [her]. There was a padlock and a chain upon the gate” (*Rebecca*, 1). The other “shook [the gates] hard but they would not open for they were hung with a rusty lock” (*A Sin*, 127).

Like the “wandering outsider” in Maturin's and Godwin's Gothic novels (Ferguson Ellis, 1989: 151-177), these two characters seem to be lost to the longed-for enticements of the domestic Eden. Both Debendranath and *Rebecca's* nameless protagonist have experienced the house from the inside, and then both were expelled from it. And in both cases a woman was the origin of their expulsion. This casts the shadow of the monstrous feminine on domestic space, and, especially in du Maurier's novel, it is the process of identification between the house and a feminine figure constructed as monstrous, that eventually makes a monstrous entity of the house itself. The myth of Eve's sin obviously peeps from behind this pattern, but it has been subject to an interesting subversive twist. The female character allegedly responsible for the second Mrs de Winter's “fall from grace” is represented as a satanic figure, thus matching the seducing serpent in the Genesis. Moreover, her attempt at corrupting the “innocent” inhabitant of the Edenic Manderley makes use of the same lever to cause a breach in her victim's ingenuity. The promise of knowledge attracts both Eve and the nameless narrator in *Rebecca* –through Mrs Danvers' delayed revelations, and her manipulation of privileged information–, and it is knowledge that causes the expulsion from the heavenly enclosure. Innocence is, therefore, equivalent to ignorance, which is consistent with the Eighteenth century notion that to keep women safe from evil they

should have no contact with, that is, not even the faintest conception of, “the ways of men” outside the secure seclusion of their “separated sphere” (Ferguson Ellis, 1989: 44-45).

### **Inverting/subverting the distinction between outsiders and insiders**

Like the Radcliffian “feminine gothic” (Radcliffe, [1794] 1980), du Maurier’s text sees the evil seducer destroy domestic space by the very means which she uses to conquer and own it. Nonetheless, a radical difference separates the Twentieth century text from the Radcliffian happy ending that sees the heroine reconstructing domestic space and restoring it to feminine control. Rebecca is quite close to the Miltonic Satan in that their malevolent attempt at destroying the Edenic haven is prompted by the will to prevent anyone from enjoying its pleasures, if they are to be excluded from them. This will put Rebecca in the position of a Godwinean outsider whose only approach to domestic space can derive from revenge and destruction. Therefore, the subversion of both bourgeois domestic space and Eighteenth century Gothic convention would consist in having the apparently opposite figures of the heroine and the villain share the same stance in regard to domestic space. Paradoxically, by virtue of their gendered experience they would both, Rebecca and her successor, be outsiders to domestic space, and, thus, only partially antithetical. The experience of both the nameless narrator and her evil opponent proves it impossible for domestic space to be “a woman’s place”. And, as I shall discuss later, this is paralleled in Gupta’s rendering of the apparently dichotomous pair Reba-Neerupama.

The same subversion of both the Gothic dimension and bourgeois ideology can be encountered in the relationship between Debendranath and the “femme fatale” who impules his exile. The first is an insider drastically turned into an outsider, the second is an outsider tragically made into an insider. So far, the relative positions of the male and female characters towards domestic space respect the convention. But Reba’s victimisation on behalf of the Calcutta house is certainly less obvious at first, than it was in Neerupama’s case. And, indeed, a good deal of narrative tension relies on the ambiguity of Reba’s role.

In the first chapter of *A Sin*, she is simultaneously portrayed as a destructive intruder (8), as a charming model of feminine virtue (14), and as a tragic lonesome figure (18). Her very charms are ambivalently interpreted as the reflection of the said “feminine virtues” and as

signs of “feminine arts”, thus making her desirably charming and threateningly enchanting. In this sense, she is represented as a worthy re-incarnation of the first Mrs de Winter. But the spell is broken when the scrutinising eyes of her brother-in-law, going beyond those images which are only projections of the observer, penetrate her inner self. For three years he had been content with imagining her as either the menacing figure who centralised domestic space while “somewhere in [the] house his mother was still quietly going mad, all because of her” (15), or as the “beautiful woman who decorated her rooms nicely, baked excellent cakes, played exceptionally well on the esraj, and could scorn a person’s indelicacy of manners with the faintest tilt of her eyebrows” (17). These descriptions of Reba correspond, on the one hand, to Debendranath’s interiorisation, and on the other hand, to the projection of a collective construction, as I shall argue later.

It is only when Debendranath visits her father’s house that he sees Reba’s subjectivity unfiltered by processes of interiorisation and/or projection. Stepping into a spatial dimension that was different from and prior to the domestic dimension she was transplanted in, Debendranath realises that Reba’s identity has been subject to a process of transfiguration within the Calcutta house, a transfiguration not so much of the specific set of qualities which constitute her self, but in the modes of expression of those qualities, and even more in the meaning with which those attributes were attached. The Calcutta house is a symbolic system where the same characteristics featured by Reba’s personality have a radically different value from the one they used to have in her native domestic space. What Debendranath glimpses in her father’s house is “the luminosity of her loneliness” (19). The mighty power of the observer’s gaze can alter completely the object of his scrutiny, and his change from projecting glances to a penetrating gaze gives him access to the “solemn territories” of Reba’s personal space. Face to face with “the sublime expanse of her loneliness” (19), Debendranath meets Reba on equal terms, for he too had grown in the “great stillness” of his mother’s “splendid seclusion” (11).

Both characters share the vast silence of an outsider’s condition. Though apparently sheltered in the sealed enclosure of the Calcutta house, neither of them is able to grow an osmotic relationship with it. Their inability to reconcile the interior dimension of the self with the exterior sphere of the collective surrounds them with an insurmountable extension of isolation, which makes them both outsiders circumscribed by domestic space. Hence the already mentioned subversive twist of Gothic structures and bourgeois

ideology; as occurred in *Rebecca*, the imagined earthly Eden of domestic space is an intangible chimera. It either secludes or excludes, but it does not leave room for the self, and thus it is primarily represented as the space of a rigidly structured collective system.

Surprisingly, this stunning revelation does not urge Debendranath to establish some link of tangible solidarity. He stayed aloof, contemplating Reba from a distance, because “he had feared but to tread lightly upon the hinterland between her inner and outer selves” (19). His fear of penetrating her personal space emerges once he has had the chance of seeing Reba in another house, her father’s large apartment, where she had gone to give birth to her child, as Bengali tradition commanded (15-20). Debendranath, immobile on the chair he has been offered on the veranda, perceives her moving around the house, humming a song “somewhere inside the network of bedrooms” (18). His status of guest only allows him to hold a prefixed position within the socially constructed space of the house, while Reba, like Moni makes her presence felt only through the material and symbolic curtains of domestic space. Furthermore, she seems to be letting the house speak for herself, for it is through the thorough examination of her father’s house furniture that Debendranath gets a deep insight into her personal identity.

How different Reba’s childhood must have been among these noiseless bookladen walls, alone, with her mother sleeping in her sick-room, and her father deep in his papers, and the maids whispering softly in the kitchen as they cleared up after lunch. It must have been in such a time that she had invented herself. From elements of the novels she had devoured in her childish loneliness, from images obliquely prescribed to her by her father and his friends, from the odours and colours of the silence around her, she had made herself (19).

The process of self-construction consists in taking pieces of the socio-cultural space that surrounds her and using them to glue up her identity. That is why she is so much of a “feminine presence”, she has made her personal space out of collective and alien space. And that is why she will use “her arts” to find her own space outside the Calcutta house. She will manage to find access to a space other than the imposed domestic space with the same tools that were meant to help her perform her role and put herself at the service of the house. Instead, she will use them to betray the cloistered house. However, precisely because she had made herself out of collective ideals, her identity and the space she will create for it will not be sufficient to give her a solid subjectivity. As we shall see further on, her individuality is isolation, and her passion, copied out from the novels of her childhood, will always “celebrate the beauty of love rather than [a] lover” (67).

In this, Debendranath is so similar to Reba that their relationship seems to be more one of identification than one of socially opposed love. He too seems able to savour love and life only as abstract, unreachable ideals. Debendranath's adoration for Reba equals her absorbed contemplation of disembodied emotions, and his attempt at escaping from the Calcutta house is as ineffectual as is hers. All he manages is to move his hopeless dreams out of the material frame of the house, but not out of its symbolic space. In England as in India he will still be chained to a never ending wheel of unfulfilment. Like Reba's, his identity as an individual has been forged inside and by domestic space, but, unlike her, his gender prevents him from finding this identity socially viable. His attachment to his mother, "his silent ally of so many years" (8), stresses his affiliation with the feminine experience of domestic space, and explains why his "manhood [...] dissolve[d] piece by piece under [Reba's]gaze" (20).

The striking similarities between them seem to point to the recognition of an "alter-ego" in his brother's wife, which would impose the already mentioned twist on the conventional "outsider-vs.-insider" scheme in Gothic fiction. Reba and Neerupama are both outsiders who are forced to hold a position in its structure, while Debendranath is an insider who is forced to surrender to the fate of a wandering outsider. But all of them find the role imposed on them at odds with their inclinations as individuals. This puts the three of them in a situation of in-betweenness which blurs out spatial boundaries and places them in no-man's land. Because of their shared experience as subaltern subjects, or rather objects, in domestic space, they are either victims of displacement or misplacement within social space, and so they can only perceive space as alien or absent. Therefore, domestic space is represented again as it was in du Maurier's *Rebecca*, as the space of ultimate exclusion, regardless of one's physical presence in it.

### **Exile and imprisonment**

Focusing on Debendranath, the Calcutta house is to him both a space of interdiction and imprisonment. Trapped in the position of the second son, he has no right of ownership of the house, but still he has to obey the rules of patriarchal family space, and so to adapt his process of self-construction to the limitations of an imposed role, just like his mother and sister-in-law. Given his gender, however, he is allowed and, indeed encouraged, to find his

own way in the world, leaving domestic space in the pursuit of an academic degree and a professional career, only to find the pull of the Calcutta house stronger than ever.

On the one hand, his universe, carved between the walls of the family house, is what shapes his perception of diasporic space, so that when he is not thinking of the Calcutta house and its inhabitants, he is comparing it with the English landscape and those who people it. Indeed, over two-thirds of the first chapter in *A Sin* are devoted to presenting the reader with the most significant facts in the structure and history of the Calcutta house, while the focaliser is actually far away from it for the first time in his life (3-4, 5-19, 21-22, 26-27). His thoughts linger over every aspect of family space and life, but are firmly centred on Reba's figure. This fact has two implications; one is that Debendranath himself is knitting the string that chains him to the Calcutta house; the other is that domestic space, as interiorised by Debendranath, constitutes by itself another point of contact between him and Reba, at once united and separated by the Calcutta house.

On the other hand, however, the Calcutta house is reclaiming him as well. Although his father claims to be disappointed at his having returned to Calcutta as a married man, instead of pursuing a Ph.D. at Oxford and initiating an academic career, he has secretly felt a subtle anger to think that Debendranath might be lost to his family domestic circle. Indranath Roy felt that

he had lost him, not to Reba, but to her father, the old professor in the dusty flat, from whom he had taken a most beloved daughter. It was as if this was his revenge, to take from him his younger son, tutor him in all sorts of political blasphemy, turn his mind with poetry and sad rainsong. [...] [A]nd yet it was this child that he loved most, for in him he saw something of his dead wife, so brutally absent in all the other children she had borne him (41).

Debendranath's devotion for Reba is not conceived as a menace to Indranath's domestic Eden because of "some hideous remnant of patrilocal consciousness that Reba was already part of his family, and belonged in some sense, collectively, to them" (25). But the possibility of losing his son to another father, to another domestic space, grips him with the force of possessiveness, the "same longing to possess and enshrine [Neerupama] that had gripped him so many years ago" (42). Debendranath's father, who has invented Mandalay, modelling it on an ideal vision of earthly heaven, is at the same time pushing his son away from his childhood nest, as is appropriate for a younger male child, and desperately attempting to retain him within the domestic enclosure. This emotional stress

threatens to tear Debendranath apart, just as his mother had been torn apart by Indranath's adoring and denying her simultaneously.

Therefore, the Calcutta house is lethal for Debendranath, not simply because it provokes an irresolvable conflict between individuality and collectively imposed structures, but because it pushes him in two opposed directions, inwards and outwards, at the same time. The Calcutta house places itself at the centre of Debendranath's world whether he is moving away from it or getting to it, thus literally seeing him coming *and* going. This enlarges the influential sphere of domestic space until it swallows every other space, and turns into a dimension of monstrous proportions. Before it becomes the haunted house forsaken by everyone except for the old gatekeeper and, for a brief spell, Niharika, Reba's daughter, the Calcutta house is actually a haunting space. And what awaits Debendranath inside is not the ghost of his dead mother, but his living father and sister-in-law, who are in fact embodying the two opposed forces of expulsion and entrapment. The first masks his desire to have him safely locked inside domestic space with plans of controlling and possessing him from a distance, converting his whole life into an overseas projection of the Calcutta house and its patterns (48). The second attracts him irresistibly with the sublime distance from which she contemplates life, so that the farther he might be from her, the stronger he would feel her spell. The result is Debendranath's inability to inhabit the Calcutta house *or* any other space. Condemned to experience the whole world as an extension of the Calcutta house, he is also forced to a never-ending exile. As a consequence, the only way out is to disappear, to exit the Calcutta house by leaving every socially constructed space at once. So he fakes his death and puts himself outside the map.

### **Buried alive**

However, as we find out two chapters later, a symbolic death and a physical escape do not bring Debendranath's conflict to a definite solution. On the contrary, they sublimate the already evanescent quality of his self into a ghostly existence. And as a ghost he returns once more to the gates of Mandalay, now itself a phantasmagorical bulk – "you are dead, said the gatekeeper, you are dead, Debendranath Roy" (127). To exist is to hold a position in the space-time continuum (Naber, 1992), to exist as a human being is to have a place in a social space-time continuum (Ang-Lygate, 1997; Brah, 1996). Because Debendranath had blurred the contours of his identity by refusing his place in the cartography of social space, he has no identity at all. Outside the borderlines of the selfhood by which he had defined



himself and had been defined, Debendranath is not free to start again the process of self-building, nor is it possible for him to construct his own personal space. What he has achieved is a hidden recess in which he can avoid definition, granting himself the luxury of an indefinite profile.

Paradoxically, it is precisely once Debendranath has reached this state that he is allowed to return to the house of his childhood. When the Calcutta house has lost its power to retain and to exclude, when it has become a spectral space, it finally equals Debendranath's own suspended situation. Not alive anymore, not entirely dead as yet, the Calcutta house represents now that absent space which alone Debendranath can inhabit. Then, for many a character it is through death only that the Calcutta house can be accessed. Whether through a slow agony, as is Neerupama's case, a deliberate renunciation of life, as is Reba's case, or by a sudden conscious choice, as in Debendranath's life story, the Calcutta house demands a sacrifice in exchange for acceptance. And, as Debendranath pictures his future in it – "he is glad to be alone in the dark in his first night here, for it is how he sees the days stretching ahead of him" (144), and Niharika imagines the future of the house – "to find it in a state of sublime decay, overrun with thick green creepers, birds' nest crowding the roofless stairwells [...]. And in his room overlooking the cemetery her uncle will still be sitting in his old armchair" (174)- it becomes clearer and clearer that the Calcutta house will stay undead as long as it can live through someone's presence, feeding off someone's life. The house that has deprived Debendranath of the possibility of having a space of his own now depends on him to keep its space, for if he had not come to stay, Niharika's brothers would have "raze[d] it to the ground and build blocks of luxury apartments on the prime site that it occupies" (176).

Even though the house now stands, like Debendranath, on the thin ground between life and death, the past and the future, the real and the imagined, it is still and will always be a family space. Since the Calcutta house had been erected upon boundaries of kinship, it demands a proof of legitimate belongingness, before opening its doors. This is why the parallelism between du Maurier's opening of *Rebecca* and Debendranath's dream stops at the iron-crusted gates. Du Maurier's nameless narrator and Debendranath will enter the estate through different means. The first "called in [her] dream to the lodge-keeper, and had no answer, and peering closer through the rusted spokes of the gate [she] saw the lodge was uninhabited" (*Rebecca*, 1). She will have, therefore, to resort to the mechanics of

the oneiric dimension to pass “like a spirit through the barrier before [her]” (1). In Debendranath’s dream, on the contrary, “the gatekeeper stood watching him, shaking his head, I cannot let you in, and it is not just because I threw away the key to that lock a long time ago, but because you are dead” (127). Before he is granted admittance he has to be recognised as belonging to the family space, he has to wear again the identity that he had forsaken for twenty years, to resume his position on the family map. And this he cannot do unless he re-emerges from the absent space of death.

Thus, unlike du Maurier’s narrator who can only access the house in her dreams, Debendranath cannot enter Mandalay in the insubstantiality of the oneiric dimension, too similar to the faded and shifting shadows of the land of the dead. He has to obey the rules of the Calcutta house and agree to be identified according to his old role, and to be physically inscribed in its space. When he presents himself, flesh and blood, at the gates of Mandalay, he surrenders to his former life and seals his fate, “[t]he gatekeeper takes his suitcase and leads the way into the house” (133).

## **SUBVERTING A DEADLY SPACE**

### **The subversion of the “woman’s place”.**

The gatekeeper at Mandalay is the only character that seems not only to care for, but also to understand Neerupama’s feelings and yearnings for what lies outside the domestic boundaries – “[d]o you think they will let me go on to a university? She had asked me, poor ignorant me, a peasant boy from her village, do you think they will let me carry on to university? She asked me feverishly” (128). Himself an outsider to the Calcutta house, he has come all the way from her native village to be “the only fragment of the beloved home that she had brought with her to Calcutta” (143). As Debendranath finds comprehension and identification only in an outsider to the Calcutta house, so Neerupama’s intimate feelings are only spoken by her faithful servant. He becomes the gatekeeper of her mind’s doors, for he acts as an omniscient third person narrator, and voices Neerupama’s interior monologues, to which both Indranath and his sensitive youngest son Debendranath seem deaf.

The fact that he has now become the keeper of the house, lovingly covering the faded walls with constant remembrances of his late mistress Neerupama (128, 140-143, 172-173), suggests that Mandalay has uncannily turned into a monument to her memory, a significantly ironic end for the space that had been her mausoleum in life. But, as

Debendranath will later notice, the house is now but an expanded version of Reba's chambers. Then, its rooms seem to be contested by these two opposed figures, who, regardless of the rivalry that the house's hierarchy has imposed on them, have now turned Mandalay *de facto* into a projection of themselves. The Calcutta house, so heavily represented as a space built by and on patriarchal power, is now rendered as a feminine space. Indranath Roy will lose its dreamed paradise to the two women whom he had forced into it. Interestingly, the house depicted as being dominated by such feminine presence –the woman's place- is also a house in ruins, abandoned, declined and decayed.

Neerupama is only present in the immaterial memories of the gatekeeper, while Reba physically occupies the space with her furniture and musical instruments. This seems only too appropriate, if we think of Neerupama's indifference towards household matters and Reba's expertise in performing each domestic duty. However, a subtle irony lies behind this perception of Reba as the epitome of feminine accomplishments, for, like Rebecca, she too uses the role imposed on her in the Calcutta house as a superficial mask, and not, as Neerupama and the rest of the family seem to assume, as an integrated part of her individual identity.

Both Rebecca and Reba subvert the image everyone has of them by using it to exceed both propriety and property, both the limitations of their role-based identity and those of domestic space. Rebecca, right after her wedding, tells her husband of the monstrous joke that she is about to play on him as well as on the world at large. With her "breeding, brains, and beauty" (*Rebecca*, 304), she will put Manderley at the centre of the county's social life, make everyone stand in awe at her perfections and pronounce her husband the luckiest man ever, while, at the same time, she will be secretly transgressing every moral law, every social rule of decorum with her orgiastic excesses and her irrepressible passions. She would simultaneously raise and destroy her husband's honour, enhance and corrupt his ancestral home, until she is able to reclaim both as the prize for her victory on a socio-cultural system that was defeated because of its own rules. Likewise, Reba betrays her role by using it to subvert its value, just as she betrays domestic space by using it to reach other, larger spaces.

Like Rebecca, who "was careful those first years [...]" and "[t]hen little by little began to grow careless" (*Rebecca*, 308), Reba slowly twists her accomplishments up to a point where

they would no longer serve the purposes associated with her imposed role, but help her achieve her own goals. The exquisite taste with which she used to adorn the rooms and the table at Mandalay, and with which she seemed able to reconcile the feminine role with her individual identity, will become less and less connected to its original function in the symbolic order of the Calcutta house. Her domestic arts will cease to be a form of consecrating domestic space as an earthly Eden, and will be re-shaped as the very means by which she will be able to break the fortress's walls. The domesticated "woman's energy" to which her father-in-law alluded is no longer limited to culinary masterpieces, or the moving beauty of some Tagore songs in the silence of the early morning. Debendranath contemplates how her powerful creative energy has swallowed every other aspect of her life, just as he would contemplate, years later, how she had "finally taken over all of Mandalay". After his return as a married man to his native house, he finds her "play[ing] for hours upon her esraj behind tightly shut doors, rush[ing] between rehearsals, and [sitting] at mealtimes, no longer hooded by her sari, but enshrouded instead by her almost morbid dedication to her art" (54). Her artistic talent has been stressed by various focalisers as one of the traits that were most characteristically hers (6, 14, 16-17, 54, 161): it is synonymous with her because she has chosen to identify with and to be identified by it. Therefore, it may be said that her dedication to art is paramount to a dedication to herself, and to her self. She, who had been playing a role for so long at Mandalay, would now be able to be herself on the stage of a theatre.

On the other hand, another aspect of Reba that immediately attracts the attention of everyone around her is her "formidable composure, her extraordinary ability to diminish anyone with a slight slant of her eyes" (17), "to make everyone stand in complete awe of her" (53). She is portrayed as powerful in her grace, as superior in her kindness. The same qualities that would make her a strong charismatic leader, had she been male, are here softened by the scrutinising eyes of the inmates of the Calcutta house. All of them seem to perceive in her only someone who is "much more of a feminine presence" (14), someone who, far from being a threat to the domestic sanctuary, would certainly be its most precious ornament. Whether this impression is the result of Reba's (un)conscious will to play her part, or on the contrary, it derives from the gazer's projection of pre-configured ideals, what everyone fails to see is that those very attributes that the family at the Calcutta house praise so much are going to cause the first breeches in its impermeability and its subsequent decline and dissolution.

**The subversion of the feminine ideal.**

Here was a woman, [Indranath] felt, who was engaged with the world, in her own small ways, as a woman should be, here was a woman who radiated grace, while his wife only dwelt within her own luminosity, drawing inwards the music that should have streamed forth from her [...] (14).

The “world” to which Indranath Roy alludes is nothing else but the Calcutta house. It is in his house that Reba’s grace radiated, and it is domestic life that she is illuminating, for she would not have the chance to bestow her charms on every other space, not for several years. Her “engagement” is to the house alone, at this stage of her life, and thus Indranath’s discourse is an implicit critique of his wife’s juvenile pretensions of saving the world of peasants and misery outside domestic space. The phrase “as a woman should be” highlights the fact that Indranath’s perspective on Reba is biased by the assumption that his ideal of womanhood can find its match in someone real. In Reba he sees the woman he dreamt of, the woman his wife should have been, and so in her he finds the living proof of the rightfulness of his ideal, an ideal which does not simply state how domestic space *should* be, but how it *can* be, and, thanks to Reba, it *is*. This also proves that Indranath’s ideal is not far from that of his mother, nor from the collectively constructed image of *the* woman. Both Neerupama’s husband and mother-in-law think of her in functional terms, in terms of what she will do for the Calcutta house: cheer it, stir it, and steer it. His relief at having “a much more feminine presence” in this curved microcosm is due to his secret realisation that his domestic heaven was not complete, that a key node in its supporting structure had failed at its function, and of course, that node was Neerupama.

The Calcutta house was built on the assumption that it would develop to be the “separate sphere”, the sacred adytum which Ferguson Ellis persuasively argues to be at the centre of British Eighteenth century bourgeois ideology (1989: ix-xviii, 3-17, 33-52). Standing on Indian territory, the Calcutta house seems to have the same foundations. Allegedly, it has been raised *around* the woman and *for* the woman. It was presented as a splendid wedding gift to Neerupama, when it was her that was being offered to the house. Indranath first bought the house and then chose his bride. He first constructed an image of his private Eden and then set about to find the necessary materials. And the “angel of the house” is the quintessential element of domestic space in this picture. Blinded by his gendered interpretation of Reba’s figure, and tricked by his own wishful thinking, he mistakes what

signs of Reba's spirit he sees for a "temperate woman's energy", still perceiving nothing but his own model image. Reba emanates and Neerupama withdraws. Reba expands herself until she swallows "all of Mandalay"; Neerupama retracts herself until she loses all substantiality, occupies no room at all, and, in a last attempt to stay alive, tries to absorb a little of the energy her daughter-in-law radiates, to rob her of a bit of the space she is taking up.

### **Defeat**

However, Reba will pay the price exacted by the Calcutta house, too. Her conquest of its space is as delusive as her apparent escape to other spaces. Reba spreads her own space onto the physical and symbolical dimension of domestic space, but the immensity of her personal space is only due to the rimless extension of its emptiness. Like a void, Reba's loneliness is infinite. "[W]ithin her was a vast empty space, sacred and untouchable, for she had found nothing yet that was worthy of inhabiting it" (18). Like Rebecca, she can only transgress the role imposed on her through self-destruction. She can only exceed the boundaries of domestic space by placing herself on stage, mirror of spaces and no space at all. She can only free herself of the images projected on her by acting out the identities of drama characters, and be listened to only when she voices the words of others. And the house that Debendranath feels is now hers at last is an uncanny ghost of its former self. Neerupama was meant to have been the queen of domestic space, only to find that it would never belong to her. Reba gets control over the house, and it dies and crumbles like Manderley under the deadly spell of Rebecca.

This asymmetric configuration of the two mistresses of the house seems to suggest that they might or might not belong to the house, but the house will never belong to them. The Calcutta house is monstrous for Reba because it plays with her the same game that Rebecca had forced on her husband, everyone would see how perfect her life at Mandalay was and no one would guess "the grand vein of unhappiness that ran through it" (161). Her "morbid dedication to art" is not a symptom of freedom and individual fulfilment, but an artificial refuge, as unsubstantial and as fragile as Neerupama's "imperturbable calmness". Reba's is a more elegant, more dignified refuge than her mother-in-law's, but it is still constructed out of frustration and bitterness. The Tagore songs she performs so

beautifully are all failed attempts at communicating with the world beyond herself and her art, because they had no addressee.

Sometimes she would wonder if her mother actually had anyone, anyone at all, in mind when she sang with such passion of the pain of love [...]. And her mother had replied that it was better sometimes not to address such things to any particular person, for people, she told her, come and go, but emotions last forever (66-67).

Reba's radiating force is the visible sign of the breathtaking passion that whirled within her. This apparently independent woman is unable of tearing apart, once and forever, the tight bonds that link her to the Calcutta house. She will not be unfaithful; she will not degrade herself to the bitterness of an adulterous affair or a divorce. But she will purify her overwhelming emotions through art. By playing Medea, for instance, ritually severing the ultimate bonds that had linked the "foreign sorceress" with her "ambitious husband", and subliming thus "the price she had paid to ensure herself against" her real husband's discarding her (161). Reba is as incapable of contrasting domestic obligations as Neerupama was before her. "You cannot always marry the man you love", Reba had said to her daughter Niharika, "or indeed love the man you marry". Her fate had been settled between her father and Indranath Roy, her future father-in-law having gone to inspect a prospective bride for his son, as is the custom in arranged marriages. Therefore, like Neerupama's "firm and faded course [...] had been selected as her fate from the moment that [Debendranath's] father, Indranath Roy, had set his eyes on her" (8), Reba's life is decided and arranged by him again. The only apparent difference -Reba's active pursuit of her art against Neerupama's disinterest in the charity works Indranath had proposed for her- means simply that the one had thankfully embraced a hobby as a poor surrogate for her true desires, while Neerupama's heart had sunk before such a sad mockery of her philanthropist aspirations.

Domestic space is thus represented as monstrous because it is experienced and perceived as such. It is deadly in that it stiffens or extinguishes altogether any possibility of articulating, developing and expressing the individual's own self, while it seeks to impose forcefully the rules and taboos that shape the family collective identity onto the starved and atrophied personal identities of its kin. The imposition of a collective identity erases any appearance of subjective autonomy and independence from the countenance of individual members of the patriarchal and patrilocal family socio-cultural space. As long as

domestic space is owned by and identified with a public space it will never be called a home by its subaltern inhabitants. At best, it will be a space of belongingness, but, even in the event of one individual being accepted into communal space, belongingness to a collective identity entails absolute self-sacrifice on behalf of individuals and is, therefore, incompatible with spaces of personal self-assertion and self-growth. It is in this sense that domestic space can be said to be a public dimension rather than a private one, as privacy requires the intimacy necessary for the self to be constructed far from socially imposed restrictions and the flexibility necessary for it to stay true to its dynamic, ever-shifting nature. As this analysis of the main first and second generation subaltern characters shows, institutionalised hierarchical family structures are represented and hence experienced and perceived as spaces of perpetual unbelongingness and exclusion/reclusion for the individual self, and thus radically opposite to the concept of “home2 as a place of inclusion where the process of self-identity construction can actually take place..

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